

WHY CLASSICS?

Prynhawn da. It is especially good to be in Swansea, even for a Cardiff boy (sorry about that – nobody's perfect): some of the happiest days of my childhood were spent here, sometimes at the Gower or at Rhossili Bay and rather more often along the road at St Helen's. There can't be many of us left now who were there when Glamorgan beat the Australians not once but twice, in 1964 and 1968, and those were the days when those fixtures were taken seriously by both sides. Thinking about what Classics has meant to me over the years has meant quite a bit of looking back over fifty years, so sorry about that too: 1968 will indeed come back at the end of what I'm going to say, so when you hear that number you'll know that the end is in sight. But I'll leave it vague for the moment what that will be about. Will it be that that it was the year that Tom Jones recorded *Delilah*, with a revelation of a wannabe aspiration of mine that never came true? Wait and see.

So – what got me into Classics in the first place? Many in this business might say 'a trip to the British Museum with my parents' or 'I really loved Greek myths', the sort of thing that Ersin Hussein and Catherine Rozier have been talking about earlier today: or, these days much more often than then, seeing someone like Mary Beard on television, or just a family holiday in Greece or Italy. I can't say the same, though I wish I could. It wasn't even the attraction of the way I was taught myself, which was very language based – the delight of getting the Latin endings right, though I did quite like that and I was very well taught, even in Cardiff. It's no coincidence that several of the first people to be really big in computers – the head of IBM, the head of Hewlett Packard – were classicists: if you could get those endings right, chances were that you could get your computer programming right too. No: I'm

afraid it was more basic than that. I wanted to be a lawyer, doubtless because of whatever courtroom series was on TV at the time (*Perry Mason?*), and someone had told me that Latin was really good for law: I could just see myself mouthing *habeas corpus* and *nolle prosequi* with the best of them, and becoming very very rich. That went well, then. And, for that matter, whoever told me that wasn't wrong: in later life I ended up teaching a lot of people who went on to be lawyers, and (a) none of them regretted having done Classics first and (b) they did become very rich. In my university we discovered that the wealthiest alums were, you've guessed it, those who had read Law – and the second wealthiest were the Classicists (and not only those who went on to be lawyers), so don't let people tell you that a classical education isn't a good investment in career terms.

So that's how I got into it, but not why I stayed: I just found I couldn't give it up. The same thing happened a year or so later, when I decided that what I was really interested in was Modern History (and I still am). I'll do that at university, I thought – but I might as well do Classics A-levels first. Well, perhaps I'll change after the first half of the Classics course (that plan was actually what I was admitted to university to do); no, maybe not yet – perhaps do some research in a subject that bridges modern and ancient? And still perhaps, when I grow up, I'll change into being a modern historian.

What made it so absorbing? Not, or at least not only, the languages, intriguing though I still find it to work out exactly what a particularly intricate phrase or figure might actually mean. It's more all the sorts of things that come out of studying Classical Civilisation as well as classical languages: the attractions of studying a culture, or in fact several different cultures whole – not just the languages, not just the poetry, not just the visual art or the architecture, not just the history, not just the

philosophy or the religion, not just the myths, but all those things and how they fit together. We're not in the business of badmouthing other subjects, of course not – barely a week goes by without someone of my age thinking how fascinating it would have been to have studied – nuclear physics, or English, or psychology, or something else (Melvyn Bragg on a Thursday morning normally does that to me). But there aren't many subjects which bring quite so many aspects together like that: if you're studying modern literature, say, you've got quite enough on your hands already without having time to look in as much detail at all the other fascinating things that might be going on at the same time as the text you're reading.

And all that generates so many interesting topics to talk about, sometimes ones that make the classical world seem very much like the modern, sometimes – and that's just as valuable – ones that bring home to us how different societies can be. So I ended up teaching at a university for forty years, most of the time in small groups finding plenty to talk about (and students were pretty good at finding there was plenty that they wanted to say and to ask). Not an unpleasant way to spend a life, really, and a great way never to get bored.

Let's take an example or so of the sort of things that we ended up talking about in all those small groups. I wondered about talking about love poetry, for instance: there's a lot of it about, and some of the emotions are pretty raw and familiar. In fact I think the best tutorial I ever had was on that: it even ended in a scuffle on the stairs as two of the students left – a real 'my work here is done' moment. Trouble is, that most of it is by blokes, going on about what a hard time they're being given: reminds me of a poem, not this time a classical one but one from sixteenth-century Italy, where a woman complains how rotten it is when a poet falls for you: they either give you a hell of a time when you say no, or else they pretend

when it was something tremendously big when it really wasn't much at all. Sigh. But not quite all is by blocked, and we do have some marvellous poetry by Sappho, some of it love-poetry addressed to her own girlfriends; we even have a new poem by her, just published four years ago – rather a long lay-off, one might feel, but yes, it's a new papyrus that has only just, slightly mysteriously, turned up. Even in our world we do occasionally get something new...

Yes, I could have talked about that, but I decided instead to look at something else, something that really illustrates that point about how different approaches and aspects could come together. Let's take a play written some time around 440 or 430 BCE, Sophocles' *Antigone*. Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus – the one who killed his father and married his mother – and Oedipus is now in exile: Antigone's uncle Creon has taken over the throne of Thebes. There has been dynastic unrest: one of Antigone's brothers has led an army against the city, the other brother has commanded the defence force, and both have been killed in the battle. The question is now one of their burial. Creon decrees that the traitorous one should be cast out unburied; the loyal one should get a state funeral with full honours. What is Antigone to do about it? She doesn't have any doubts: she slinks out and buries the body that Creon has commanded to be left untouched – indeed, she does it twice, and she's caught. There's a passionate confrontation of uncle and niece, followed by another one in which Haemon, Creon's son, has a flaming row of his own with Creon; and Haemon was due to marry Antigone, so is understandably put out. Creon sticks to his guns; Antigone is led off to be buried alive. Still, there's more to come: enter a blind prophet, Teiresias, who provokes another fit of rage from Creon, but does discomfit him too. Creon indeed begins to crumble, and even takes some advice: he sends to let Antigone out, but it's all too late. She's hanged herself; Haemon, the fiancé, has killed

himself at the tomb into the bargain; but even that's not enough, as finally Creon's wife kills herself too. So all in all, not a good day for anyone, and almost as many corpses by the end as you have at the end of *Hamlet*.

Now there's clearly quite a lot going on there, and a lot of it centres on moral issues – right and wrong. What is the right thing for Antigone to do? *Is there a right thing for Antigone to do?* What was right for Creon? When I used to lecture on this, I always used to start by asking what, actually, was it *about* – if there's a clash of principles here, what is at stake? Is it, for instance, the clash between human and divine authority? Or between state and family? Or between law and conscience? Or about male bullying and female self-assertion? Or all of them? There were always several different answers coming, and that's usually the start of a good discussion. It was interesting too how often we ended up talking about how much difference it made that Antigone was a woman; how different would it be if, for instance, Haemon had been the one to defy his father by burying the corpse. And it won't be easy to think our way as far as we can into the mindset of the original audience, as several of those issues would seem pretty different to them from the way they seem to us, matters of religion for instance or matters of gender.

Limiting this scope to that original audience is by no means the only worthwhile thing to do, and one interesting development in the way we do Classics now is an interest in how later societies have interpreted an original text – partly because that's fascinating in itself, and partly because you never know what strands we might be missing but other cultures might pick up. It is no coincidence that this is one of the plays that has been most often adapted or reperformed: after all, the issues have resonance for generation after generation. Having your brother cast out unburied is admittedly not the sort of thing that happens regularly, but it clearly focuses a

broader question that keeps coming back. What *is* the best way of being a good person under a bad regime – a bad emperor (this was a recurrent issue in the Roman empire, for instance, one that preoccupied Tacitus), or a bad dictator, or a bad President. One adaptation that is particularly interesting is that of Jean Anouilh, whose *Antigone* was written in France in 1942 and first produced in Paris in February 1944. It was very much written and played with suggestions of Antigone as a resistance heroine and Creon as the great collaborator, with more to be said for him than one might begin by expecting. There's an immensely powerful speech in that play where Creon explains that 'it's easy to say no', easy for people like Antigone to stand out against a hated regime: that martyrdom, the proud refusal to compromise, is in fact the easy answer; the difficult thing is to say yes, to ... collaborate, to accept that there is hard and dirty work to be done and that to do it oneself may prevent someone else from doing it in an even dirtier way. I'm not sure that we necessarily believe he's right: but we certainly give him a hearing, and it's interesting that, as I understand, at the first performances both German occupying forces and non-Nazi-sympathising French both felt that the play was taking their side of things. That really does bring out in one way how timeless these issues are, but also how every generation and every new context might find something new there, and find it answering to their own concerns in a different way.

And – going back to Sophocles and *his* audience – right and wrong? It certainly seems by the end of the play that Creon was wrong: Heaven makes that clear enough, with the bad omens reported by the prophet Teiresias, and Creon himself comes to see that too. But does that mean that Antigone was 'right'? One article that all students read is entitled 'Antigone as a bad woman'. Antigone is taking on not merely the head of state but also the head of her family, and that's a double rebellion

against authority – something that would be taken very seriously: a triple rebellion, indeed, as she's a woman, a young woman, taking on a senior man. She plays the God card: when confronting Creon, she tells him that

It was not Zeus who issued that order of yours, and it was not Justice, the companion of the gods below, that defined laws like this among mortals; and I did not think your orders were strong enough to outmatch, mortal as you are, the unwritten and secure laws of the gods. They live not for today or yesterday, but for ever, and nobody knows their origin.

And I remember learning those lines by heart as a good quote when I was reading the play – 'doing' the text – for A-level way back then in Cardiff: I obviously thought ah yes, she must in that case be right – I was a teenage Methodist. Yet at the time lots of the audience, predominantly and perhaps even exclusively male, would have reacted by thinking 'and who exactly do you think you are, missy, to decide what Zeus wants?' On the whole the expectation was that it was the state that decided how religion should be pursued, and Creon is most definitely the head of state. So there's plenty of ways in which Antigone's being a woman makes what she does even more extreme, even more transgressive – in terms of normal civic thinking, more wrong, even if Creon was wrong too.

Yet at the same time the one area of civic life in which women played a really big role was – religion; one can even find some traces of a view that women understood the gods better, had a sort of hot line to the gods – one female character in a play of Euripides said as much, though we haven't got the whole play and we don't know what happened to her after saying something so bold. So does that make her more likely to be 'right'? Maybe. What one can say is that her sex makes everything more extreme – her transgressiveness, her stubbornness, her conviction that she's in the right. Creon too of course is extreme: state authority is one thing, but he uses it in

a particularly uncompromising way. And extremes often give a certain clarity: there's nothing mealy-mouthed about the clash of principles here, no matter how exactly we frame that clash, but it's all presented in the starkest way.

None of these issues is easy, and they wouldn't have been found easy at the time – but you'll be seeing what I mean by saying that we've got to make some imaginative leaps if we're going to frame things in anything like the same way as that original audience. And why is it worth making the effort? Partly because once we've done it we may come away wondering if our own assumptions were quite as marvellous as all that: if other societies thought differently, might there be something to be said for their way of thinking? Is the conscience card quite so marvellous, really, as that teenage Methodist thought? That's not so far away from that very live issue in two cases, one in the US and one in Northern Ireland, of whether a baker can refuse to bake a wedding cake for a gay couple. Is keeping state and religion separate straightforwardly right? (Well, yes, I think it is, but I don't mind thinking about it.) And partly because that effort of understanding other cultures, and realising how difficult it is and how one needs to take lots of things into account if one isn't going to get things terribly wrong, is not a bad habit to get into.

By the end of the play, this one like many others, lots of the audience might have found their sympathies and opinions had changed as the play went on: they might not initially have found even Creon so clearly in the wrong as all that, just as those Nazis in 1944 found something there to sympathise with. Part of the shock of being in a Greek tragic audience would often be unease at remembering what you were sympathising with an hour and a half earlier: whatever one may think of 'safe spaces' in the modern world where people can be shielded from discomfort, the Greek tragic theatre was certainly not one of them. In Euripides' *Medea*, for instance, Medea

has a very powerful speech criticising the dual standards of society for men and women, with arguments that would be most uncomfortable for men of the time to hear but which it would be very hard to counter; but if one was won over by then, one could be just as uncomfortable by the end of the play when she murders her own children to get revenge on her husband. There are other plays too when, for instance, democracy itself is subject to pretty fierce attack, with no holds barred on pointing out the way that an assembly can be won over by popular and populist arguments to make very bad decisions indeed – a war here, an execution there. There seems to be a positive relish in hearing arguments against principles and ideals that the audience cherished: perhaps the point is that if democracy can stand up against the best-aimed criticisms, all the better for it, and we'll be the stronger ourselves for feeling that despite everything it's the best system for us. But it's certainly a very different world from the one we know, where we bury ourselves in social media and just hear the views of people who think the same way as we do – and I'm as bad at that as anyone.

I'm nearly out of time, so let me get back to 1968. Was it Tom Jones and *Delilah*? No, though I confess that I had my moments of delusion when I was invited back to the Millennium Stadium a few years ago to give a talk on university admissions: I could just see myself Tom-Jones-like on a dais on the half-way line playing to the adoring thousands. It turned out not to be quite like that.

No: it's a much more sinister figure, an ex-classical-scholar who has been in the news again recently because of that fiftieth anniversary: Enoch Powell, the politician who in that year delivered a speech that stirred up racial tensions in an absolutely horrible way. There was a radio programme marking the anniversary a month ago which was itself quite controversial, as many people thought, with some reason, that it was better just to let it die unremembered. In fact though that

programme was fascinating, not least because of the way the rhetoric of the speech was taken apart in close analysis, showing how many of the tricks of classical rhetoric Powell was using – Cicero, who had his own racist moments, would have been proud of him. It's a clear indication of how classical learning can be abused as well as used. Let's concentrate on just one moment, the phrase for which the speech became notorious:

As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood.

'The Roman' is Virgil: Powell is playing an authority card, both the authority of classical learning and his own authority as an intellectual figure who knows about such things. But it's also worth seeing exactly where that quote comes from. It's Book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid*: the band of Trojans, refugees from their city after it had been sacked by the Greeks, have just found their way to Italy, where they are hoping to establish a new home. Refugees, desperate migrants – lots of modern resonances there, fair enough, and even more today than there would have been for Powell in 1968. There's even some ancestral claim to an Italian homeland, sanctioned also by Heaven, so those who want to find analogies with Israel and Palestine can do that too. This comes in a fearsome prophecy of what awaits Aeneas in Italy, delivered by a propheticess, the Sibyl, in a cave near Naples. Her point is that it's going to be tough: they've fought one Trojan War, but now it's all going to kick off again:

And you will be a suppliant begging in dire need among all the peoples and all the cities of Italy. Once again the cause of all your suffering will be a foreign bride, another marriage with a stranger. But do not give way to these adversities: face them all the more boldly, go where your fortune allows. The first path to safety is what you least expect: it will start from a Greek city.

So at the end the message is quite different from Enoch Powell's. It won't be easy, but don't let that put you off: face your troubles all the more boldly, and you will prevail. The last thing you might expect is different peoples to work together, but that's what will happen: your old enemy the Greeks will work with you, the very people who forced you to be refugees. Even that picture of 'begging in dire need' around the peoples of Italy is not really how it's going to be: Aeneas will go off in search of help, sure, but he'll find it soon enough, and it won't be given grudgingly. And by the end of this Book 6 Aeneas will have received a very different prophecy, this time after he has descended to the Underworld and been given a vision of Rome's glorious future, one in which Trojans and Italians will both be playing their part as a single people. The moral is not 'just go back home, stick to your own kind': it's 'you can do this, don't go wobbly now'. There's a case indeed for thinking that that picture of the river 'foaming with much blood' prepares for a different importance of blood – the bloodline that eventually the peoples will share.

Still, this isn't really a question of looking for a different take-home message, and a nice one; I don't doubt that you can find, if you look, lots of other take-home messages in lots of classical texts, and not all of them are comfortable. What that little homily actually suggests is that one should read texts carefully, look at the context, and not be content with a shallow soundbite. But we've certainly found another case where the preoccupations of a classical text can come very close to home in the modern world, and one in which the ancient writer doesn't shy away from acknowledging that things can be difficult: no safe space there, once again. And, once again, thinking hard about that text – and arguing hard about it, as I've had many students arguing hard about it when I've been teaching – is 'good to think with' about the complexities of the modern world as well, and that can't be bad. *Diolch yn fawr.*